

Sermon: Easter I

Our Lord's resurrection appearances to his disciples are like no other episodes in the New Testament. They are mainly at the end of St Luke's and St John's gospels and they have an atmosphere, an enchantment, all their own. If one is allowed a favourite, I love to turn to the story of the walk to Emmaus late on the first Easter Day. *All in the April evening*. Two people – tradition says they were a married couple, disciples of Jesus – were walking the seven miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, an ancient Hellenistic town known for its games arenas and its hot baths.

The couple are desperately sad, disappointed and confused. Jesus joins them and, you remember, they don't recognise him. It is most evocative, strange. Eliot alludes to the scene in *The Waste Land*:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you? When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road There is always another one walking beside you,
gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded I do not know...But who is that on the other side of
you?*

That country road, *towards evening and the day far spent*. Jesus seems almost to be teasing when he asks them why they are so sad. And they reply bitterly, *Art thou only a stranger in Jerusalem and hast not known the things which are come to pass concerning Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word...how he was condemned to death and crucified*. And they add that preposterous tales have only made things worse: *Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished saying that they had seen a vision of angels and that he was alive...*

This is instructive. It is our age, the vaunted 21st century, which prides itself on its scepticism. But, you see from this story, people found it as hard to believe the resurrection on the first Easter as they now do on the 2000 – oddth. Modern sceptics are fond of insulting people of New Testament times, saying how primitive and superstitious they were – just the sorts of people to go in for all these weird tales of resurrection. But those people of Bible times were not superstitious. They did not believe that men rose from the dead – until one did.

That couple on the road to Emmaus did not believe. Or what about Thomas – Doubting Thomas – and his macabre insistence: *Except I put my finger into the print of the nails and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe*. The fishermen did not recognise the risen Christ as he stood on the shore. When he appeared to them in the upper room where they were hiding for fear of the authorities, St Luke tells us, *They were terrified and affrighted and supposed they had seen a spirit...*

What we see in all these resurrection appearance stories is the centre of attention suddenly and violently shifted from the single person of Jesus to the group of his disciples: in biblical language from Christ to his Church. The disciples, the Church, are no longer passive recipients of Christ's ministry, but they are commanded to carry on Christ's ministry. Christ's resurrected body does not hang around or linger. After a few weeks it disappears altogether. The disciples, the Church – we – are commanded to be Christ's body in and for the world.

You remember one of the main charges against Jesus by the Jewish religious authorities was that he claimed to forgive sins? This, they said, was blasphemous, because only God can forgive sins. But look what Jesus now does to the disciples in the upper room, behind locked doors: *He breathed on them and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them: and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained*

So now the disciples of Jesus are given power to forgive sins. What can this mean? Of course it means that the priest can effectively pronounce the Absolution. But Our Lord's saying about the forgiveness of sins extends further than that. You recall how we say of our sins, *The burden of them is intolerable*? Well, after Christ's commandment, we are given authority and told to bear one another's burdens and so make them tolerable. Because of the resurrection, a profound and mysterious psychological and spiritual shift has taken place: from the individual to the group; from Christ to his Church.

What we are commanded to do – and we are enabled to do it, because Our Lord does not command what is impossible for us – is to share our very being with one another; to locate our being in one another. Our individual self-consciousness is to be replaced and transcended by the consciousness of the group. We are to be one body. This is what is meant by saying that the Church is the body of Christ.

This is the meaning of that darn-near untranslatable New Testament word *agapay* – sometimes rendered *love* and sometimes *charity*. The new life through the resurrection is what enables us to escape from the tyranny of our individual self-consciousness and to find our reality in one another. Ethically speaking, this means that altruism is not enough. In fact altruism is the wrong track. For it means the individual, as individual, reaching out and giving to others. But the commandment and the authority to forgive sins goes beyond this and asks us to find our identity in our belonging to the one body. That is *agapay* – love.

This is what John Donne understood and captured for us in his beautiful words: *No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee*

And John Donne means us to understand this not merely as a figure of speech, but as reality. Love is the only reality. The rest is illusion.

This is what the resurrection does for us. It is not a symbol or a metaphor. It is not even an event that was limited to an episode in the life of Jesus. By the power of the resurrection there is a miraculous, metaphysical change in our nature. No longer is the governing pronoun *I* but *we*.

This is what *communion* means. It is something far more than what religious denominations argue about according to the niceties of ecclesiastical polity. Communion is complete self-transcendence. This is the redemption and salvation given to us by Christ. We are freed from the prison of our individual self-consciousness: that slough of despond, that centre of anxiety and dread which out of fear makes us cling to the one thing we cannot have – life in myself alone. This is where the fear of sickness and death lurks. All Prince Hamlet's speculative anxieties. All the *Angst* and fretfulness of the existential philosophers. Kierkegaard's dread. Samuel Beckett's solipsistic misery and *the absurd*. Harold Pinter's *comedy of menace*, which is all you have left when you're trapped in yourself.

That is the obsessive self-delusion which Shakespeare defines as a living death in the words: *Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I*. That is the individual life which we must surrender for Christ's sake. Remember how he said: *Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it*. All contained in those other words he gave us: *Let us love one another*